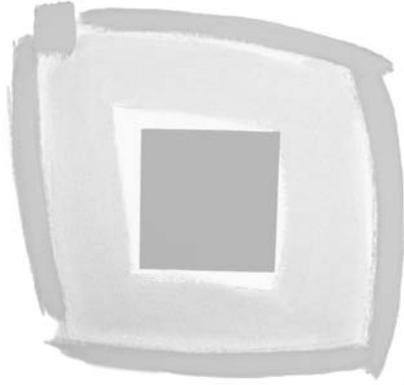


# THE FIDELITY OF BETRAYAL





THE FIDELITY OF BETRAYAL  
TOWARDS A CHURCH BEYOND BELIEF  
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For my friends who know what it is to embrace their faith  
by betraying it with a kiss.



# CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	The Caretaker's Trial	1
INTRODUCTION	What Would Judas Do?	5
PART 1	The Word of God	11
ONE	The Betrayer, the Betrayed, or the Beloved?	13
TWO	Abraham as the Father of Faith(ful Betrayal)	26
THREE	The Biblical "wHole"	41
PART 2	The Being of God	63
FOUR	The Name of God	65
FIVE	Eclipsing God	86
SIX	Beyond God	105
PART 3	The Event of God	127
SEVEN	The Intervention of God?	129
EIGHT	The Miracle of Christian Faith	143
NINE	Forging Faith Communities With/out God	162
CONCLUSION	Crossing Out God for the Sake of God	181
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		185
NOTES		187



# PROLOGUE

## The Caretaker's Trial

**T**here was once a small town filled with believers who sought to act always in obedience to the voice of God. When faced with difficult situations the leaders of the community would often be found deep in prayer, or searching the Scriptures for guidance and wisdom.

Late one evening, in the middle of winter, a young man from the neighboring city arrived at the gates of the town's little church seeking refuge. The caretaker immediately let him in and, seeing that he was hungry and cold, provided a meal and some warm clothes. After he had eaten, the young man explained how he had fled the city because the authorities had labeled him a political dissident. It turned out that the man had been critical of both the government and the church in his work as a journalist. The caretaker brought the young man back to his home and allowed him to stay until a plan had been worked out concerning what to do next.

When the priest was informed about what had happened, he called the leaders of the town together in order to work

out what ought to be done. After an intense discussion it was agreed that the man should be handed over to the authorities in order to face up to the charges that had been made against him. But the caretaker protested, saying, "This man has committed no crimes, he has merely criticized what he believes to be the injustices perpetrated by authorities in the name of God."

"What you say may be true," replied the priest, "but his presence puts the whole of this town in danger. What if the authorities find out where he is and learn that we protected him."

But the caretaker refused to hand him over to the priest, saying, "He is my guest, and while he is under my roof I will ensure that no harm comes to him. If you take him from me by force then I will publicly attest to having helped him and suffer the same injustice as my guest."

The caretaker was well loved by the people, and the priest had no intention of letting something happen to him. So the leaders went away again and this time searched the Scriptures for an answer, for they knew that the caretaker was a man of deep faith. After a whole night of poring over the Scriptures the leaders came back to the caretaker, saying, "We have read the sacred book all through the night seeking guidance and found that it tells us that we must respect the authorities of this land and witness to the truth of faith through submission to them."

But the caretaker also knew the sacred words of Scripture, and he told them that the Bible also asked that we care for those who suffer and are persecuted. There and then the leaders began to pray fervently. They beseeched God to

speaking to them, not as a still small voice in their conscience, but rather in the way that he had spoken to Abraham and Moses. They begged that God would communicate directly to them and to the caretaker so that the issue could finally be resolved. Sure enough, the sky began to darken, and God descended from heaven, saying, “The priest and elders speak the truth, my friend. In order to protect the town this man must be handed over to the authorities.”

The caretaker, a man of deep faith, looked up to heaven and replied, “If you want me to remain faithful to you, my God, then I can do nothing but refuse your advice. For you have already demanded that I look after this man. You have written that I must protect him at all costs. Your words of love have been spelled out by the lines of this man’s face, your text is found in the texture of his flesh. And so, my God, I defy you precisely so as to remain faithful to you.”

With this God smiled and quietly withdrew, confident that the matter had finally been settled.



# INTRODUCTION

## What Would Judas Do?

 In the 1990s the phrase “What Would Jesus Do?” became a popular slogan for millions of Christians across the English-speaking world. Originally inspired by the book *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon, these words were quickly reduced to the abbreviation “WWJD” and etched onto countless bracelets as a way of reminding the bearer that they held Jesus up as the ultimate authority in moral, political, and religious matters. These bracelets quickly became a popular accessory among Christian teenagers, so much so that the letters “WWJD” started to appear on a whole range of consumerist products such as jewelry, bumper stickers, badges, bookmarks, key rings, and even underwear.<sup>1</sup>

Of the various predictable parodies that arose in the aftermath of this widespread phenomenon, there was one that struck me as particularly intriguing and insightful. The parody in question came to my attention via a Web site that playfully offered the following advice: “When life throws

you a curveball, remember to just ask yourself: what would Judas do?” Although the actual intention of the Web site was superficial and satirical in tone (carrying mock testimonies of people who had considered this question and then gone on to lie, steal, and seduce), I was struck at the time by the thought that, far from offering some amoral, antireligious sentiment, the question “What Would Judas Do?” could perhaps offer us a tantalizing hint of what it would mean to ask, “What Would Jesus Do?”

In other words, what would Jesus do when confronted with Christianity today? Would Jesus do what Judas did, and betray it? In saying this I am not hinting at the rather mundane insight that Jesus would betray the anemic, inauthentic, self-serving Churchianity that so often festers quietly under the banner of Christianity today. I am not asking whether Jesus would turn the tables on what passes as contemporary Christianity in favor of a more robust and radical version that may have once existed in an age long past. Rather, by asking whether Jesus would betray Christianity as Judas betrayed Christ, I am asking if Jesus would plot the downfall of Christianity in every form that it takes. Or rather, to be more precise, I am asking whether Christianity, in its most sublime and revolutionary state, always demands an act of betrayal from the Faithful. In short, is Christianity, at its most radical, always marked by a kiss, forever forsaking itself, eternally at war with its own manifestation.

Such thinking leads to the seemingly paradoxical idea that the deepest way in which we can demonstrate our fidelity to

Christianity is to engage in a betrayal of it. If this is the case then, in order to remain true to the spirit of “WWJD” (the desire to emulate the life of Christ) we must inscribe the “J” with an ambiguous double meaning, one that simultaneously references both Jesus and Judas, one that dances between the two, one that cannot separate them any more than we can pry apart the “two” sides of a Möbius strip.

In order to explore this idea the following work is split into three complementary sections. The first explores what we mean by the idea of the Word of God, the second interrogates the Being of God, and the third introduces the reader to the centrality of the Event of God. As the book progresses, it will become clear that the Word, Being, and Event of God are inextricably bound up with each other in a Trinitarian structure that defies any attempt at being divided.

As this structure is gradually revealed, I argue that the consequences are twofold. First, we are led to embrace the idea of Christianity as a religion without religion, that is, as a tradition that is always prepared to wrestle with itself, disagree with itself, and betray itself. Second, this requires a way of structuring religious collectives that operate at a deeper level than the mere affirmation of shared doctrines, creeds, and convictions. It involves the formation of dynamic, life-affirming collectives that operate, quite literally, beyond belief.

On a personal note, the potentially controversial nature of this book has meant that there were times when I wondered whom I was really hoping to address with it. While staring out my window between words, there were times when I reflected upon who would pick up this book, read its message, and take it to heart. Indeed, I even had a dream one evening in which I witnessed my anonymous reader entering a library and, hesitating for a moment, slowly picking up the finished piece. Only now, as I re-read what I have written, have I finally worked out who it is I am writing to, only now have I worked out who that stranger in my dream really was, who it has always been: it has never been anyone other than myself. Just as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan once made the comment that a letter always reaches its destination, a book like this can never fail to reach the one to whom it is written. Why? For no other reason than because it is the one who writes it who is the intended reader.

In realizing this, I am reminded of a story in which a group of prophets pack their few belongings, bid farewell to their loved ones, and sail off to a faraway land in order to share their sacred message of salvation. After months of struggling with the stormy seas, often cursing their vocation for leading them into such terror and torment, they finally land on a sandy beach along the coastline of a distant country. Ravaged by starvation, doubt, and ill health, the now diminished group finally reaches a small city nestled inland and begins to preach. Being strangers, the group initially attracts a great deal of attention, and the people listen eagerly to their message. But as the weeks run into months and the months

dissolve into years, the citizens finally stop taking any notice of these prophets in their midst. Yet still they enter the city each day and still they share their sacred message of joy and suffering. Eventually one of the inhabitants, who has become intrigued once more by the strangers, approaches them while no one is watching and asks, “Why do you continue to sing your sorrowful song when it is obvious that no one is listening anymore?” In response, one of the group steps forward, looks the young man in the eyes and, with deep tenderness, replies, “In those early days we spoke because we believed that we had something to share with the people of this land. But now, now we speak only to challenge ourselves to remain faithful to that to which we are bound.”

Christianity is not brain surgery or rocket science, it is not quantum mechanics or nuclear physics; it is both infinitely easier and more difficult than all of these. The fragile flame of faith is fanned into life so simply: all we need do is sit still for a few moments, embrace the silence that engulfs us, and invite that flame to burn bright within us. This act is simplicity itself, and, just perhaps, after a lifetime of hardship and struggle, a few of us will achieve it and be set alight by it.